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SUBJECT: SPANISH ELECTION OUTLOOK: ONE MONTH OUT, POPULAR  
PARTY HOLDING ON TO LEAD

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires J. Robert Manzanares,  
reasons 1.4(B) and (D).

#### Summary

1. (C) Polls one month before the March 14 Spanish general election continue to point to victory for the Popular Party and Aznar's successor as party leader, Mariano Rajoy. The PP hopes not just for a plurality, but for an absolute majority. Were the PP to fall far short of an absolute majority, coalition formation would prove troublesome. Most polling consistently shows the PP hovering just short of the absolute majority threshold. Socialist leader Rodriguez Zapatero has sought to breathe new life into his campaign by exploiting the Iraq/WMD controversy, criticizing Aznar for joining the Iraq coalition. Most analysts believe the Iraq issue will not be a major factor unless Spain's 1300 troops in Iraq suffer large casualties. One month before the election, the outlook is similar to when Rajoy became Aznar's successor last September: the perception in Spain is that it is Rajoy's race to lose. End Summary.

#### Major Party Differences on Relations with the U.S.

2. (SBU) On March 14, Spaniards will go to the polls to select a new Parliament, which will, in turn, select a new Prime Minister, known in Spain as "President of the Government." Polling data and political commentary have, for the past six months, pointed to a plurality for the PP, led by Aznar's successor as party leader, Mariano Rajoy. This trend continues. Most polls show the PP leading by seven or eight points over the Socialists.

3. (C) Rajoy and Socialist (PSOE) leader Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero offer distinct domestic and foreign policy choices to the Spanish electorate. Rajoy has pledged to maintain Aznar's strong ties with the US, including its close counter-terrorism cooperation and participation in the Iraq coalition. He also promises to keep Spain's vigorous economy on track and preserve the integrity of the Spanish state in the face of nationalist pressures in the Basque and Catalunya regions.

4. (C) Zapatero, in contrast, pledges to re-focus Spain on Europe. Zapatero argues that Aznar's tilt to the US has damaged Spain's standing in the EU, where the Socialists see their country's future. Zapatero has been a relentless critic of Aznar's Iraq policy and what he sees as Aznar's "subservience" to the Bush Administration. Zapatero says he will establish a transatlantic relationship based on "mutual respect and friendship," not on submission.

5. (C) Zapatero also strongly criticized Aznar for appearing before a joint meeting of Congress February 4, saying that Aznar was willing to go before the US Congress while ignoring Socialist calls for him to appear before a special session of the Spanish parliament (in recess because of the elections) to explain pre-war intelligence on WMD in Iraq. On the domestic front, Zapatero pledges to increase social spending for education, health and culture. He has promised not to raise taxes and says he will pay for these programs by reducing defense spending.

6. (C) Despite efforts to shift attention again to Iraq, Zapatero has been unable to turn popular opposition to Aznar's Iraq policy (which brought millions of Spaniards into the streets in February and March 2003) into support for his candidacy. On February 12, Zapatero said that if elected, he would withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq in July if the mission had not been turned over to the UN by that date. Zapatero misses no opportunity to call the war "illegal and immoral" and to denounce Aznar for ignoring Spanish interests by allying Spain with what Zapatero calls "the most conservative US Administration in history."

#### Role of Aznar

7. (C) The manager of the PP's national campaign, Gabriel Elorriaga (who is also State Secretary for Public Administration), told us in late January that one of the major challenges for the PP in the campaign is how to deploy Aznar. Elorriaga conceded that the PP needs to be careful

not to overshadow Rajoy or antagonize the Socialist ranks and provoke greater Socialist turnout. Nonetheless, thus far, and consistent with his personal style, Aznar has been out in front ) and far more on the attack than Rajoy. On February 10, in a typical jibe, Aznar declared that the Socialists have no coherent leader or party and are not fit to govern Spain. He demanded that Zapatero tell Catalan Socialists to break their coalition with the Catalan Republican ERC, whose leader, Carod Robira, met with ETA leaders in France in early January.

18. (C) Zapatero continues to focus his criticism largely on Aznar, rather than Rajoy. Rajoy's strategists tell us privately that this suits them just fine because the Iraq issue in particular is identified with Aznar, rather than Rajoy. Thus Aznar takes the heat while Rajoy enjoys a widespread reputation, even among Socialists, as more of a bridge-builder, with a far less dominating personality than Aznar.

19. (C) Some in his own party have criticized Rajoy, a veteran of eight years in key Ministerial portfolios in Aznar's two governments, for conducting an overly scripted and risk-averse "rose garden" campaign. Rajoy has resisted pressure from the Socialists to publicly debate Zapatero, for example. Others point out, however, that Spaniards vote according to party lists, not necessarily on personalities -- a key difference between the Spanish and US systems -- and therefore the lack of a high profile is not necessarily a negative for Rajoy.

Absolute Majority: the Numbers and Turnout

10. (C) The PP needs 176 seats in the 350-seat Congress of Deputies (lower house) to form an absolute majority. In 2000, the PP won an absolute majority of 183 seats. In 1996 the PP won 146 seats and formed a coalition government. Some of the 1996 coalition partners, such as the Basque Nationalist PNV, would not enter into a coalition with PP today.

11. (C) PP campaign manager Elorriaga told us he was confident the PP would win at least 171 seats this time and said that if the campaign went well, the PP could hope for an absolute majority, although he conceded this would be difficult. Elorriaga believed that the 183 seats the PP received in 2000 represented the PP's electoral ceiling. He doubted they would reach it in 2004 given the eight years of PP government and the natural desire of the public for a change.

12. (C) Should the PP fall four or five seats short of 176, Elorriaga said they can count on the Canary Coalition (a regional Canary Islands party) to cover that margin. Beyond that, coalition formation becomes problematic for the PP. Most PP analysts believe that CIU, the moderate Catalan nationalist party (which had 15 seats last legislature), would be willing to work out a deal with the PP, if it came to that. However PP strategists are not sure this would happen and would like to avoid this contingency.

13. (C) PP strategists and other analysts, including Elorriaga, focused on the issue of voter turnout. Elorriaga told us that the PP wanted to mobilize its people but avoid public gloating that could antagonize the Socialists and mobilize them against the PP. He said polls before the 1993 general election had been favorable for the PP but that the PP had committed the error of holding large rallies on the eve of the election that, ironically, mobilized the Socialists against them and helped cost the PP the election. Elorriaga said that over-confidence was a major danger for the PP.

The Alternative to a PP Victory: Government of the Left

14. (C) The likely alternative to a PP victory is a coalition of the Socialists and the Left Union (Communists) supported by nationalists such as the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV). Zapatero has stated that he would not seek to form a government unless the Socialists get the most votes nationwide. Nonetheless, many analysts believe that if it came to it, the Socialists would lead such an "anybody but the PP" coalition. The PSOE sought to do it in the Madrid region last October and have done it in the Balearic Islands and elsewhere.

Comment

15. (C) The perception in Spain is that the March 14 election remains the PP's to lose. Despite polls that show that a majority of Spaniards favors the idea of a change in government, the PP has enjoyed a solid lead for months. The Socialists, as a consequence of their disunity and weak leadership, have been unable to capitalize on a general desire for change. However, there are a few wildcards that have the potential to change the equation. These include

possible large Spanish casualties in Iraq and a possible backfiring of Rajoy's cautious approach to campaigning and his unwillingness to debate Zapatero. Nonetheless, as it now stands, the majority of analysts, including many Socialist contacts, expect the PP to form the next government. What they do not agree on is whether the PP will receive an absolute majority. The polling is inconclusive. If Zapatero can prevent the PP from gaining an absolute majority ) which would involve the PP's loss of at least 8 seats ) he might be able to claim some victory and remain PSOE leader. Should the PP win an absolute majority, the knives among the Socialists may well come out for Zapatero. A resounding PSOE electoral defeat, were it to occur, might well bring calls for one of the longtime Socialist barons, such as Bono from Castilla La Mancha or Chavez from Andalusia to come to the PSOE's rescue.

MANZANARES